

**Title:** Undeterrable Ideologue or Deterrable Pragmatist: *An Assessment of the Rationality of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Conflict Initiating Behavior*

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# Undeterrable Ideologue or Deterrable Pragmatist?

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## *An Assessment of the Rationality of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Conflict Initiating Behavior*

*By Marcus Granlund*

**ABSTRACT:** I seek to analyze Iran's conflict initiating behavior by means of assessing the state's national capabilities relative to its primary targets of aggression in order to discern whether the Islamic Republic of Iran has experienced a tendency to initiate conflict against relatively more powerful states. Rooted in the fundamental assumption that a rational state does not initiate conflict against other states that are significantly more powerful than it is, the analysis is conducted in the hope of shedding light on whether Iran's conflict-initiating behavior has been rational post-1979 in order to determine the state's deterrability. The study is conducted by first employing a cross-temporal within-case study that looks at fluctuations in the dyadic balance of power in militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) initiated by Iran across four distinct periods of time: 1957-1967, 1968-1978, 1979-1989 and 1990-2000. Secondly, Iran's fluctuations are compared to those experienced by two other revolutionary authoritarian regimes, the Soviet Union and China, during the time period that extends from two decades before their respective revolutions to two decades after. Lastly, I create a control variable comprising 20 randomized MIDs where the initiator's Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) score falls within the range of Iran's over the course of its history during the period 1957-2000. The study finds that Iran's conflict initiating behavior became significantly less rational in the decade immediately succeeding the revolution, but that it thereafter became increasingly rational and less hostile. Importantly, Iranian conflict initiations have, on average, occurred within the confines of rational behavior across each of the four time periods considered, including post-1979. The Islamic Republic thus fits the mold of a deterrable pragmatist rather than an undeterrable ideologue.

**Keywords:** Iran, rationality, deterrability, militarized interstate disputes, conflict initiation, nuclear weapons

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“Iran’s leadership comprises a group of extreme fanatical Muslims who believe that their messianic times have arrived. Though Russia and the US both had nuclear weapons, it was clear that they would never use them because of MAD. Each side knew it would be destroyed if it would attack the other. But with these people in Iran MAD is not a deterrent factor, but rather an inducement (Yedidya 2012).”

– **Bernard Lewis, Professor Emeritus (Princeton University)**

“Whoever gets nuclear weapons behaves with caution and moderation. Every country – whether they are countries we trust and think of as being highly responsible, like Britain, or countries that we distrust greatly, and for very good reasons, like China during the Cultural Revolution – behaves with such caution (Sagan and Waltz 2007).”

– **Kenneth Waltz**

## **I. Introduction**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is certain about Iran. In viewing the Islamic Republic as a "messianic, apocalyptic, radical cult" that is "wild in its ambition and aggression" (Haaretz 2013), Netanyahu regards the regime as an undeterrable ideologue and stresses the immensity of the dangers that he associates with a potential Iranian nuclear weapon. Contrary to Netanyahu’s alarmism, the Obama administration has displayed considerable faith in the rationality of the Iranian regime by pursuing a long-term diplomatic solution with regards to the country’s uranium enrichment program.

The extent of the disagreement over the deterrability of the Islamic Republic that is evident in discussions regarding a possible Iranian WMD illuminates the lack of a comprehensive empirical assessment of the regime's rationality. This empirical gap is remarkable considering the disastrous impact that an irrational nuclear actor could have on the international stage. A nuclear Iran deemed to be undeterrable could indeed destabilize the entire international system by carrying out the annihilation of the state of Israel and proceeding to hold the world at ransom to its demands.

In expanding upon the methodological framework of a previous study made by Joseph Grieco that assessed the alleged belligerence of Iran post-1979, I seek to analyze Iran's national capabilities relative to its primary targets of aggression in conflicts that it has itself initiated in order to discern whether the Islamic Republic has experienced a tendency to initiate conflict against relatively more powerful states. Rooted in the fundamental assumption that a rational state does not initiate conflict against states that are significantly more powerful than it is, the analysis is conducted in the hope of shedding light on whether Iran's conflict-initiating behavior has been rational post-1979 in order to determine the state's deterrability.

The study is conducted by first employing a cross-temporal within-case study that seeks to evaluate whether the dyadic balance of power in militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) initiated by Iran has changed over time and, in particular, post-revolution. I assume that the level of rationality inherent in conflict initiations can be measured by computing the primary defender's national capabilities as a percentage of the total capabilities of both the initiator and target, which I refer to as the dispute's dyadic balance of power (alternatively, its CINC percentage). I thus proceed to analyze

Iran's primary targets of aggression's share of total capabilities across four distinct periods of time: 1957-1967 (two decades before the revolution), 1968-1978 (one decade before the revolution), 1979-1989 (one decade after the revolution) and 1990-2000 (two decades after the revolution). Thereafter, I compare Iran's fluctuations in the dyadic balance of power of its conflict initiations with two other revolutionary authoritarian states, the Soviet Union and China. Lastly, I create a control variable comprising 20 randomized MIDs where the initiator's Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) score falls within the range of Iran's over the course of its history during the period 1957-2000.

In terms of the paper's scope, the empirical results are based on the assessment of 302 initiations of MIDs, which primarily comprise Iran, China and the Soviet Union's initiated disputes during the period of time that extends from two decades before their respective revolutions up until two decades after. The total number of MIDs under consideration also includes 20 randomized conflicts ranging from threats to use force to outright war, which form the basis for the study's control variable.

## **II. Literature Review**

The possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon in the not too distant future has elicited considerable debate among scholars, decision-makers and policy commentators, having grasped the attention of much of the international relations community. At the heart of the international community's qualms over an Iranian nuclear capability lies the much-disputed deterrability of the Islamic Republic as a fundamentalist, revolutionary, and authoritarian regime viewed as comprising religious zealots, by some, and deterrable pragmatists by others.

On one side of the debate, we find deterrence advocates, including the likes of Barry Posen and Kenneth Waltz, who maintain that Iran fits the mold of a rational actor. According to Posen, with the exception of Iran's inflammatory rhetoric towards Israel, the regime seems deliberate and cautious in the way that it uses limited forms of violence to promote its national interests. In addition, he regards Iran's rhetoric towards Israel as a means by which the regime attempts to bolster its own legitimacy, rather than comprising sincere threats aimed at eradicating Israel from the face of the earth. Accordingly, Posen is convinced that the international community, and the United States in particular, would be able to deter Iranian aggression if it were to acquire nuclear weapons by means of making the costs of belligerence excessively prohibitive (Posen 2006a). As such, Posen is a firm advocate for the effectiveness of mutually assured destruction (MAD).

Posen identifies three potential pathways through which weapons of mass destruction could facilitate Iranian aggression, but whose validity he severely questions contending that that "the first two... are improbable and the third is manageable" (Posen

2006b). The first two refer to the assertion made that Iran could give nuclear weapons to non-state actors and the possibility that a nuclear Iran would be capable of blackmailing other states into submission, respectively. Posen asserts that facilitating the acquisition of a nuclear weapon by a terrorist organization is extremely unlikely as it, he points out, “serves no strategic purpose, invites retaliation and cannot be controlled”. In the event that a terrorist organization would engage in a nuclear attack and the origin of the weapons would be traced back to Iran, the Islamic Republic would surely face the full force of a nuclear retaliation by the United States. Posen also dismisses the idea that a nuclear Iran would be able to make other states in the region heed to the regime’s demands on the assumption that Iran would be attentive to the fact that the United States would not allow for such actions to go unpunished (Posen 2006a).

The third scenario outlined by Posen relates to the possibility that a nuclear Iran would feel less constrained in engaging in subversion or conventional aggression. He however views the notion that Iran would be able to rely on a diffuse threat of nuclear escalation in order to deter others, thus enabling it to roam freely, as being far from certain (Posen 2006b). He points out that a nuclear state also becomes a potential nuclear target and thus doubts the feasibility of a more belligerent Iran in this regard, thus making the fundamental assumption that Iran is rational and, consequently, deterrable.

Waltz, similarly, stresses what he perceives as the rationality of the Iranian regime in debates concerning a possible Iranian nuclear capability. He notes that he does not know of “many religiously-oriented people that act in ways that will result in the massacre of thousands of people” (Sagan and Waltz 2007) – a statement that is highly



indicative of the degree of rationality that deterrence advocates attribute to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Waltz, in particular, points to historical precedents, focusing his attention on the United States' experience with the Soviet Union and China during the Cold War. In doing so, he defends the United States' ability to deter Iran, a relatively small country, given that it has been shown capable of deterring bigger powers in the past (Sagan and Waltz 2007).

On the other hand, Allan Stam and Dan Reiter have contended that autocratic regimes are more willing than democratic states to initiate risky wars against adversaries that have a greater chance of winning. In other words, autocracies are said to have systematically lower conflict initiation thresholds when it comes to the prospect of being victorious in conflicts. This, Stam and Reiter argue, is because democratic states by their very nature are more vulnerable to public discontent, which produces a greater sense of reluctance on their behalf with regards to initiating conflicts that they cannot be relatively certain of being victorious in (Reiter and Stam 1967). On the basis of Stam and Reiter's observations and the definition of rational states contained herein, it would seem that there might be grounds for doubting the rationality of the revolutionary theocracy that is the Islamic Republic.

Bernard Lewis and Norman Podhoretz are among the more prominent critics of the alleged rationality of Iran that is at the root of Posen and Waltz's confidence in MAD. To Lewis and Podhoretz, the consequences of an Iranian nuclear weapon cannot be assessed on the basis of historical precedents since Iran constitutes a uniquely irrational actor. This, they argue, is because Iran is ruled by a unique fundamentalist, revolutionary, and authoritarian regime whose religious convictions they perceive as

having imposed significant constraints on the level of rationality with which the Islamic Republic has been able to conduct foreign policy.

Lewis goes so far as to argue that, to Iran, the prospect of MAD comprises an inducement rather than a constraint. He comes to this conclusion as a result of attributing an apocalyptic worldview to the Iranian regime as well as claiming that it suffers from a martyrdom complex, which has transformed the state into a highly irrational and, indeed, suicidal actor. Lewis views the regime's apocalyptic worldview as being rooted in the Shiite belief in the return of the Hidden Imam, which will bring victory to the forces of good over evil. He moreover regards the Islamic Republic's martyrdom complex as being evident in the state's rhetoric, pointing to a statement by Ayatollah Khomeini found in an Iranian schoolbook that reads: "If the world-devourers wish to stand against our religion, we will stand against their whole world and will not cease until the annihilation of all of them. Either we all become free, or we will go to the greater freedom which is martyrdom" (Lewis 2006).

Norman Podhoretz likens the West's struggle with Iran to the Cold War in emphasizing its ideological roots, arguing that Western democratic values have become pitted against a form of totalitarian Islamofascism, most prominently personified by the Islamic Republic. Podhoretz, like Lewis, dismisses the idea that Iran is deterrable, invoking statements made by Robert G. Joseph, the US Special Envoy for Nuclear Non-Proliferation, that supposes that "we could wake up one morning to find that Iran is holding Berlin, Paris or London hostage to whatever its demands are", if it were to go nuclear. In comparing Hitler to Ahmadinejad, two revolutionary leaders who sought to overturn the international system, Podhoretz is convinced that a nuclear Iran will have

no problems with ceding nuclear weapons to terrorist organizations and is certain that Iran would destroy the state of Israel through the use of WMDs, if it were to acquire them (Podhoretz 2007). In this regard, Podhoretz fails to see the cautious and deliberate nuclear Iran that is highly aware of and attentive to the United States' national capabilities advocated for by Posen and Waltz.

### **III. Method**

The Correlates of War Project's Militarized Interstate Disputes (v3.0) data set and the National Material Capabilities (v4.0) data set comprise the empirical foundation for my analysis of Iran's conflict initiating behavior, from which I compute dyadic balance of power scores that are at the heart of my analysis. The dyadic balance of power represents the defender's percentage share of the total capabilities of both initiator and defender in militarized interstate disputes. It is calculated by dividing the defender's CINC score by the sum of the defender and initiator's CINC scores (expressed as a percentage). It is important to note that the calculation's designated defender constitutes the *primary* target of aggression. In this sense, the measure of the dyadic balance of power utilized in this study does not account for alliance formations as parties with secondary interests in the MIDs under consideration have been excluded. The dyadic balance of power scores are subsequently analyzed in three stages.

First, I employ a cross-temporal within-case study of the state of Iran. Accordingly, fluctuations in the dyadic balance of power in MIDs initiated by Iran are assessed across four distinct periods of time in Iranian history; 1957-1967 (two decades before the revolution), 1968-1978 (one decade before the revolution), 1979-1989 (one decade after the revolution) and 1990-2000 (two decades after the revolution), with particular attention paid to the latter two time periods. A total of 112 initiated MIDs are considered, representing all MIDs initiated by Iran during the period 1957-2000, from which average dyadic balance of power scores are computed for each of the respective decades and subsequently compared. The purpose of this analysis is to assess whether Iran has experienced systematically higher average dyadic balance of power scores post-

1979 in order to determine whether the Islamic Republic has become more or less rational in its conflict initiating behavior.

Second, I compare Iran's fluctuations over time in the dyadic balance of power to those experienced by China and the Soviet Union, two other revolutionary authoritarian regimes, during the time period that extends from two decades before their respective revolutions to two decades after. In the case of China, a total of 93 MIDs are considered, representing all MIDs initiated by China during the period 1927-1970, from which average dyadic balance of power scores are computed for each of the respective decades. In the case of the Soviet Union, a total of 77 MIDs are analyzed, representing all MIDs initiated by the USSR during the period 1895-1938. The CINC percentages experienced by both regimes for each of the decades are subsequently compared to Iran in order to assess the assertion made by critics of MAD who contend that the Islamic Republic comprises a uniquely irrational revolutionary state that thus cannot be analyzed on the basis of historical precedents.

Third, I invoke a control variable comprising 20 randomized militarized interstate disputes, where I control for the initiator's CINC score so that it falls within the range of Iran's CINC score for the period 1957-2000. A control variable is created in order to establish a standardized so-called "irrationality threshold" for the dyadic balance of power, beyond which conflict initiations are deemed irrational. The results indicate the existence of such a threshold at a dyadic balance of power score of 53.5%, meaning that conflicts that are initiated against states that possess greater than 53.5% of the total capabilities in a conflict are considered irrational. The purpose of creating a control variable is to moderate the effects of the limitations inherent in my underlying

assumption with regards to what rational behavior on behalf of nation-states entails. Inevitably states with exceptionally high CINC scores, signifying comparatively very powerful states, will have significantly fewer potential irrational adversaries. As such, creating a control variable that comprises MIDs initiated by states with CINC scores that are similar to Iran's is an attempt to control for this limitation and better understand what constitutes a 'normal' dyadic balance of power in militarized interstate disputes.

## **IV. Results & Discussion**

### ***Results***

The empirical data suggests that Iran's conflict initiating behavior became significantly less rational in the decade immediately succeeding the revolution, as well as more violent, but that it since 1989 has become increasingly rational and less hostile. For the period 1979-1989, the findings suggest that the dyadic balance of power in Iranian conflict initiations shifted towards the primary target of aggression, as evidenced by a higher average CINC percentage for the decade immediately succeeding the revolution in Appendix III. The higher average score was driven by an increase in irrational MIDs as a proportion of total conflict initiations (Appendix II), primarily initiated against Western powers, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France and West Germany, but also the Soviet Union.

The results furthermore point to Iran's foreign policy having undergone a period of moderation two decades after the revolution with the result that its conflict initiating behavior became more rational. The results indicate that the dyadic balance of power increasingly tilted towards Iran as a result of convalescence from the fever of revolution (Brinton 1952), which reduced Iran's hostility towards significantly more powerful states, primarily having initiated disputes against Iraq and Afghanistan, and other Middle Eastern states, during this time. This higher level of rationality characterizing Iran's conflict initiating behavior is evidenced by a lower average CINC percentage two decades after the revolution (Appendix III), and is reinforced by a reduction in the average levels of hostility reached in irrational conflict initiations (Appendix II).

It is particularly worth noting that Iran's conflict initiating behavior, interestingly, has lied within the realm of rational behavior across all four periods of time under consideration. The irrationality threshold comprising the control variable is seen to exceed Iran's average CINC percentage across each of the four decades considered (Appendix III). In fact, the uniquely irrational autocratic theocracy that Bernard Lewis and Norman Podhoretz have found in the Islamic Republic does not seem to have existed during the timespan covered by the Correlates of War Project's datasets. This observation is further supported by the empirical results derived from the between-case comparison with China and the Soviet Union, which point to a significant degree of convergence having occurred two decades after their respective revolutions with regards to the level of rationality inherent in their conflict initiating behavior (Appendix III).

### ***Discussion***

In his book The Anatomy of Revolution, Crane Brinton assessed the English, American, French and Russian revolutions in the hope of identifying a set of phases that characterize the revolutionary process. He found that the immediate post-revolutionary period in these countries generally followed a pattern in which radical forces triumphed over moderates in a struggle for power and subsequently implemented a reign of terror, with America being the exception. Fanatically devoted to their cause and against all forms of perceived immorality in their newly established republic of virtue, a forceful minority would instigate purges of government ranks followed by the establishment of a revolutionary regime that would resort to violence as a means by which to resolve its problems (Brinton 1952).



In the case of Iran, the period 1979-1989 very much complies with Brinton's analysis. Having commenced as an anti-dictatorial mass movement rooted in a broad coalition of anti-Shah forces, the 1979 revolution soon spiraled into a fundamentalist Islamic power struggle (Zabih 1982). In defiance of Shapour Bakhtiar, the last Prime Minister under the Shah and moderate opponent of the Shah's regime, Ayatollah Khomeini appointed his own competing interim Prime Minister upon his arrival in February 1979 (Nikou 2013), proclaiming: "This is not an ordinary government. It is a government based on the sharia... Revolt against God's government is a revolt against God. Revolt against God is blasphemy" (Moin 2000). Khomeini's proclamation very much set the stage for the reign of terror and the purges that he were to be able to instigate himself under the guise of *velayat-e faqih*, whereby Khomeini provided 'political guardianship' for the Iranian people through assuming the position of Supreme Leader.

The formulation of foreign policy in the decade after the revolution was thus very much shaped by Iran's revolutionary experience, which had severely damaged the state's channels of communication. As is the case with most revolutions, the Islamic Revolution brought with it the replacement of virtually everyone who had experience with foreign affairs, not least as a result of the purging of public officials with ties to the pre-revolutionary regime. As a consequence, the Islamic Republic became uncertain about other states' intentions as a result of ultimately having had no previous direct experience in dealing with them. In the absence of such experience, the state, as pointed out by Stephen Walt, tends to fall back on ideology, which in the case of revolutionary regimes portrays outsiders as hostile (Walt 1992). This heightened sense of insecurity

on behalf of Iran in the decade after the revolution, as such, served to increase the total number of conflict initiations during the 1979-1989 period (Appendix I) and the proportion of irrational disputes as well as their average hostility level (Appendix II).

Fueled by the revolutionary fervor that permeated public discourse at the time and at the backdrop of the “Neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic” approach to foreign policy, Iran’s conflict initiating behavior on the whole became less rational in the decade after the revolution. This was in large part because the regime’s “Neither East nor West” stance caused friction with both sides of the Iron Curtain, and with the West in particular. The revolution was partially a reaction to the Westernization attributed to the policies of the Shah (Rakel 2007) and, consequently, a harsh anti-Western stance thus became an integral component of the revolutionary regime, coming to serve as an important legitimizing factor. Accordingly, the Islamic Republic initiated a greater number of conflict initiations against substantially more powerful Western powers (including the United States, the United Kingdom, France and West Germany, amongst others), which drove the reduction in the rationality of Iran’s conflict initiating behavior in the decade succeeding the revolution.

While Iranian conflict initiations on average became less rational during the 1979-1989 period, it is however important to make a distinction between actions taken by the Iranian regime and those taken independently by government organizations. The extent to which the rationality of Iranian conflict initiations declined is arguably somewhat exaggerated in the empirical data because of the lack of such a distinction. As mentioned, the vast replacement of officials associated with the Shah’s regime incurred significant damage to the Islamic Republic’s normal channels of communication. This, in

turn, made independent action by security agencies or public officials without explicit government sanction increasingly likely. This seems to for example have been the case in May 1987 when the second-ranking British diplomat in Iran was pulled out of his car and beaten after an Iranian consular officer had been arrested in Manchester, accused of shoplifting (Bakhash 2001). In this regard, the reduced rationality of Iranian conflict initiations evidenced by a lower CINC percentage for the decade after the revolution (Appendix III) may be slightly exaggerated by the empirical data.

According to Brinton's analysis of the stages of revolutions, the reign of terror characterizing the first stage of the post-revolutionary period is succeeded by a phase of recovery, or a Thermidorian reaction, whereby revolutionary principles are relaxed as a result of convalescence from the fever of revolution. In reaction to the violence of the reign of terror, a period of moderation emerges. The most violent public figures are eliminated, while some of the moderates having been imprisoned during the reign of terror are gradually pardoned and given amnesty. In addition, this phase of recovery is generally characterized by dire economic circumstances (Brinton 1952), which in part drive the reduction in revolutionary fervor.

In the case of Iran, the period 1990-2000 followed a similar pattern to that of Brinton's convalescence, although it did not take the shape of a full Thermidorian reaction. Gradually appearing from the mid-1980s onward in the form of increasing pragmatism in domestic and foreign policy (Rakel 2007), a period of moderation emerged, especially as the war with Iraq had drained revolutionary fervor, the Iranian people's morale and the country's financial resources. The end of the war in 1988 combined with the country's economic suffering prompted Ayatollah Khomeini to

authorize a five-year economic plan that allowed the government to borrow from abroad. The death of Khomeini in 1989 furthermore removed a powerful, domineering figure in Iranian politics, which allowed for a somewhat greater degree of flexibility for the Iranian government when it came to the formulation of policy (Bakhash 2001). This paved the way for a relaxation of revolutionary principles, resulting in moderates being elected President; Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani assumed the presidency in 1989 and Mohammad Khatami in 1997. As a result of their policy initiatives that were made possible by the period of moderation, Iran's conflict initiating behavior became increasingly rational during the period 1990-2000 (two decades after the revolution), as indicated by a lower CINC percentage (Appendix III).

Seeking economic development, Rafsanjani proceeded to repair Iran's foreign relations and pursue engagement with the West. Iran's relaxation of revolutionary principles became evident on the international stage as Rafsanjani faced down opposition in the Majlis that pressed for an alliance with Iraq against the United States as the latter sought to expel the former from Kuwait in 1990-1991. Instead, he in effect sided with the objectives of the American-led coalition in seeking to expel Iraq (Bakhash 2001). Rafsanjani additionally sought "critical dialogue" with the European Union (Rakel 2007), resumed diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan and effectuated a release of American hostages in Lebanon, which is a testament to Iran's moderation during this time. Engagement with the West ultimately resulted in the EU assisting Iran economically through rescheduling \$12 billion of Iranian debt as the country faced a balance of payments crisis (Bakhash 2001).

Khatami expanded upon Rafsanjani's policy of engagement, having been elected on the basis of a promise of political liberalization and a foreign policy of rapprochement. Khatami extended an olive branch to the United States in January 1998 calling for a "dialogue of civilizations", which resulted in a series of exchanges, or so-called people-to-people initiatives, between the two countries of academics, athletes and artists (Bakhash 2001). In addition, Khatami visited a number of European states and improved relations with the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Rakel 2007).

Accordingly, the 1990-2000 period can be likened to Brinton's phase of recovery. However, it is important to point out that the increased rationality in Iran's conflict initiating behavior also was marred by a series of assassinations of Iranian dissidents in Europe, including France, Germany and Austria (Rakel 2007). In addition, Supreme Leader Khamenei undermined Khatami's efforts at improving relations with the United States by continuing to assist US designated terrorist groupings, including Hamas and Hezbollah, and to subscribe to strict anti-American rhetoric (Rakel 2007). As such, the period 1990-2000 followed the pattern of a slow, uneven return to a relaxation of revolutionary principles, rather than a quick, radical transformation of the regime, but constituted a period of convalescence nonetheless. The assessment of Iranian foreign policy during this time and the empirical data, in any case, point to an increasingly rational Iran, rather than lending support to the supposedly suicidal state envisioned by Bernard Lewis.

In fact, Podhoretz and Lewis' assertion that the Islamic Revolution has transformed the state of Iran into a uniquely irrational nation-state that thus cannot be assessed on the basis of historical precedents is severely undermined by the empirical

evidence. I find that Iranian conflict initiations, on average, have occurred within the confines of rational behavior across all four time periods under consideration, which is evidenced by the irrationality threshold consistently exceeding that of Iran's CINC percentages (Appendix III). The Islamic Republic moreover does not seem so unique once a comparative analysis with China and the Soviet Union is employed. The results point to a convergence of Iran's conflict initiating behavior with that of China and the USSR having occurred during the 1990-2000 period. The average CINC percentage of Iran declined two decades after the revolution approaching China and the Soviet Union (Appendix III), two states that given the extent of their national capabilities have a far smaller pool of potential adversaries that would give rise to irrational conflict initiations (as defined for the purposes of this paper). As such, the Islamic Republic of Iran is found to constitute a deterrable pragmatist, rather than an undeterrable ideologue.

## **V. Conclusion**

Through analyzing the dyadic balance of power in Iranian conflict initiations, I find that Iran's conflict initiating behavior became less rational in the decade succeeding the Islamic Revolution of 1979, but that it thereafter became increasingly rational as the state entered a phase of recovery whereby revolutionary principles were relaxed. This reversal, rather than being the result of a drastic reevaluation of Iran's geostrategic interests, was characterized by a slow, uneven return to quieter times caused by the pursuit of economic reinvigoration and facilitated by the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. Iranian foreign policy became less constrained by revolutionary fervor, which in turn allowed for a greater degree of pragmatism for the government when it came to the formulation of foreign policy.

Most importantly, the study finds that the Islamic Republic of Iran fits the mold of a deterrable pragmatist, rather than comprising the undeterrable ideologue envisioned by Lewis and Podhoretz. The uniquely irrational state that they have themselves found in the Islamic Republic is severely undermined by the empirical findings of this paper, which point to a convergence between Iran's conflict initiating behavior and that of China and the Soviet Union's. Even more telling, I find that Iranian conflict initiations, on average, have occurred within the confines of rational behavior across each of the four time periods considered, suggesting that Iran is indeed a rational actor driven by material interests, first, and ideological considerations second, and thus can be deterred.

Accordingly, my findings lend support to and reinforce the validity of deterrence theory in the debate regarding a potential Iranian nuclear weapon, which is based on the fundamental assumption that states act rationally. In spite of the fact that Iran comprises

a revolutionary theocracy that is radically different in terms of its ideology compared to Western-style democracies, the Islamic Republic is still bound by the same constraints under international anarchy as that of other states in that it ultimately seeks to ensure its own survival.

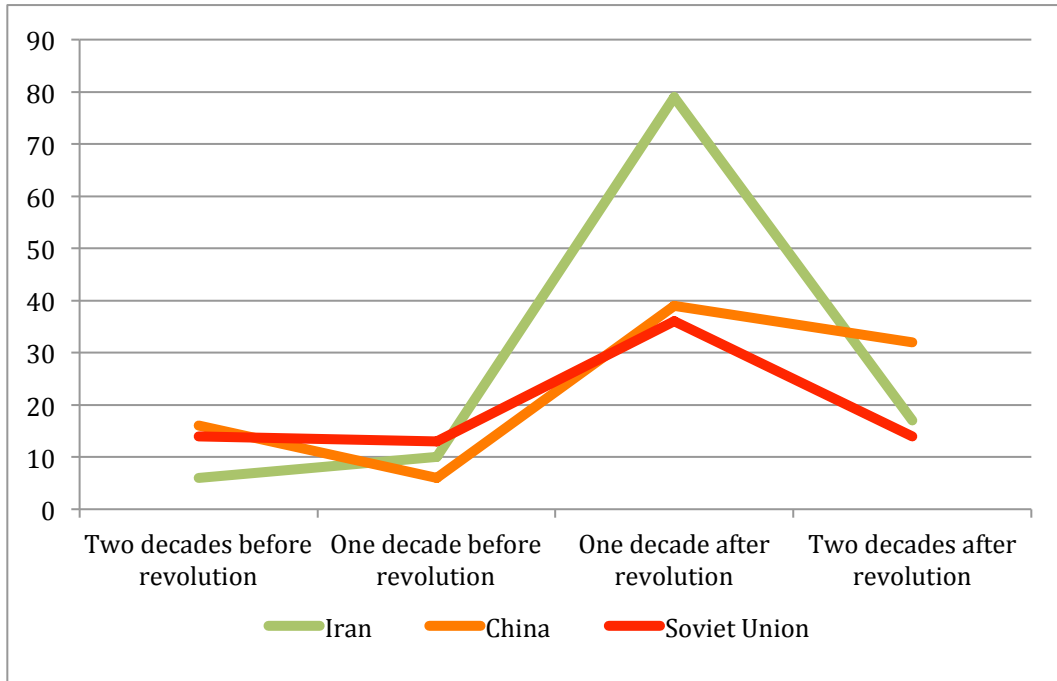
The findings furthermore have an important policy implication as a result of ruling out the notion that Iran comprises a "messianic, apocalyptic, radical cult" (Haaretz 2013). By suggesting that Iran constitutes a deterrable pragmatist, the empirical findings rule out the need for immediate air strikes by the United States of Iranian nuclear facilities for fear of the Iranian regime comprising an undeterrable ideologue.

The results of my analysis point to the importance of conducting further research with regards to Iran's conflict initiating behavior. This is particularly pertinent as the Correlates of War Project's datasets upon which my quantitative analysis are based exclude the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. As such, it would be interesting to see whether Iran's demonstrated relaxation of revolutionary principles and the increasing rationality of its conflict initiating behavior continued three decades after the revolution, or whether the Ahmadinejad era represents a break with this trend. Lastly, my empirical analysis illuminates the need for future research with regards to how to best construct reliable and efficient metrics for assessing rational decision-making with respect to nation-states. An inherent limitation of my definition of rational states as ones that do not initiate conflict against substantially more powerful states relates to the fact that more powerful states have a smaller pool of potential adversaries with which the initiation of disputes would be considered to be irrational.

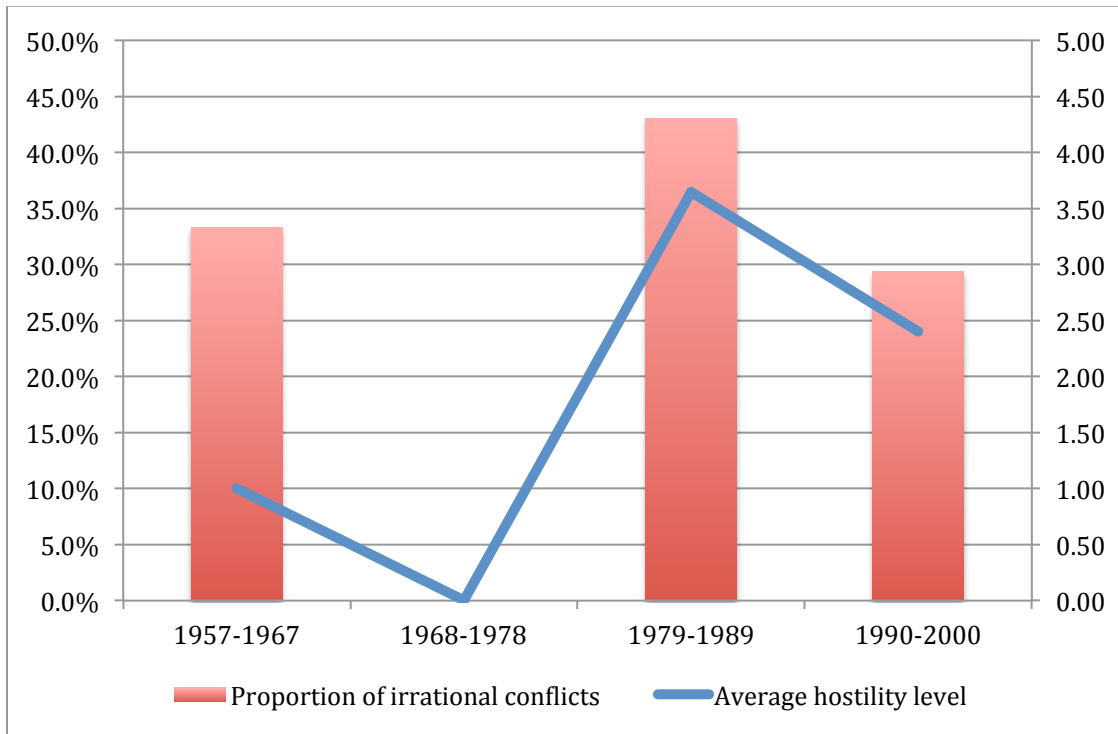


## **VI. Appendix**

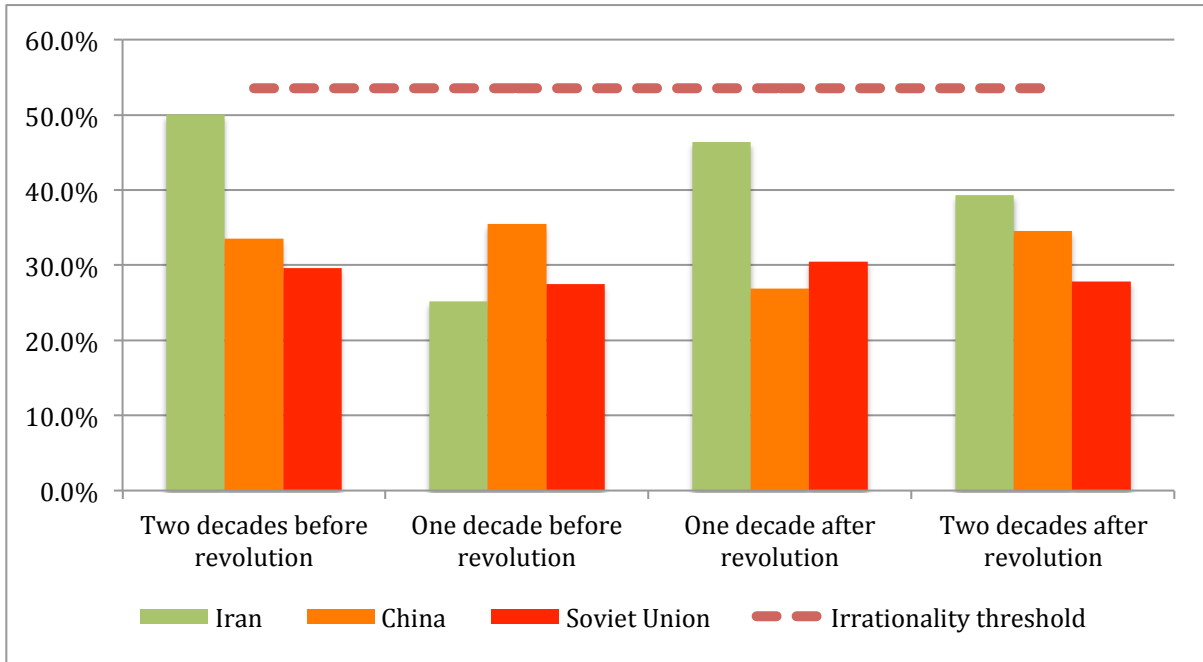
### **I. Total Number of Militarized Interstate Dispute Initiations over Time**



### **II. Iran's Proportion of Irrational Conflict Initiations as a Percentage of Total MID Initiations and their Respective Average Hostility Levels**



**III. Average Dyadic Balance of Power in Militarized Interstate Disputes (as measured by the defender's percentage share of total capabilities)**



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